WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?
Luke 1:57-79
December 7, 1980

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

This is a story of an old priest and his wife at the time of the birth of Jesus. There were, it is estimated, twenty thousand priests in the occupied country of Israel at that time. The criteria for the office were racial and genetic. All the male descendents of Aaron, Moses' elder brother, first priest of Israel, were automatically members of the priestly caste. There were so many priests in Israel, in fact, they had to practice their office in shifts. Each priest was a member of a section: sections served in the Temple on a rotating basis. A priest might, therefore, be on duty one week a year. During that week he lived in the Temple, presided over morning and evening ritual sacrifices for the nation, burned incense, and then went home to his family and occupation for the other fifty-one weeks of the year.

The priest about whom we are concerned this morning was an old man by the name of Zechariah. His genealogical credentials were impeccable. In fact, even his wife Elizabeth was well born. She, too, was a daughter of Aaron. They were good people: kind, honest, they took their religion seriously, not simply for the one week a year Zechariah was a priest. They were advanced in years, a relative term obviously: fifty surely, or sixty or maybe seventy. One reality about them, however, dominated all else. One thing about them was relentless, negative and colored everything. They had no children. In 1980 we affirm with enthusiasm intentional life styles that do not include children or marriage. But not two thousand years ago in Israel, Zechariah and Elizabeth's situation is defined by the powerfully descriptive Hebrew word "barren". Barrenness was a sign of God's disfavor. A childless couple must have done something to incur divine punishment: they must be guilty of something. Barrenness was grounds for divorce, and the simple fact that Zechariah and Elizabeth were still together in old age tells us a great deal about the strength of their love. One imagines them as a young married couple expecting those familiar signs of pregnancy, giggling and plotting how to spring the joyous news on parents and friends. One imagines their mild surprise when all their peers begin to produce babies and still, months pass by, empty. And, yes, one imagines not-so-subtle accusative confrontations with mothers and mothers-in-law, and fathers and fathers-in-law. "Really now Elizabeth, isn't it about time?..." "Zechariah, old boy, didn't anyone ever tell you how to get the job done?" And one imagines the months becoming a year, and then two years, and the terrible anxiety, the guilt, the tragic monthly cycle of hope, desperate love, waiting and then disappointment.

They had waited for thirty, forty, fifty years. The time for bearing children was long past. The disappointed grandparents long dead. But there is something about this couple that tells us they were still waiting, perhaps because it was all they knew how to do: perhaps because there was no end to their hopefulness. All priests waited. All Jews were waiting for the day of the Lord; the day of His coming; the day of judgment and justice and freedom. Zechariah did that kind of waiting too. But his was much more personal, much more intense.

And then, during the time he was performing his priestly duties, Zechariah had a vision that scared him half to death, speechless in fact, - and he rushed home and as soon as he saw his wife's face he knew that the incredible, unspeakable, impossible notion which was stuck in his mind as a result of that crazy vision, was true. Elizabeth was going to have a child! Zechariah remained speechless all during the pregnancy which, under the conditions, is at least understandable.

That's one of my favorite stories. It is woven into the story of an annunciation involving an angel and a young relative of Elizabeth's, Mary. Elizabeth's baby will be named John. Mary's will be called Jesus. It's a marvelous Advent text. But it is

significant, also, because it is about waiting, a word that is loaded theologically, and an activity with which every person who ever lived is intimately, and sometimes distressingly familiar.

Waiting is not easy for some of us: Americans, for instance, for whom waiting means inactivity, empty time, therefore wasted and finally, meaningless time. We are activists, par excellence. Philosophically we peg individual identity on "doing", not "being". We define who a person "is" on the basis of what he or she "does". As soon as we are introduced we ask, "And what do you do?" That philosophy is so much a part of our cultural personality that we have to hold seminars designed specifically to help people think and talk about themselves in terms other than what they "do" for a living or leisure or recreation.

Waiting can be an emotional crisis for us. Commonly, waiting makes us angry. A trip to a doctor's office, sitting in the "waiting room" for instance, is so significant that some of us will talk about it and complain about it for weeks, sometimes months and years. A traffic jam on an expressway, such as the one I found myself in last week, hemmed in on four sides with absolutely no alternatives but to wait, can be a major crisis for some of us, as we worry about what we're missing and what we could be doing with the time. Or, more poignantly, the enforced waiting in the hospital, after major illness or surgery, waiting for the slow process of healing and restoration, is not easy. Much of our intentional life,in fact, is the very antithesis of waiting. Lived like a sprint, life is fast, packed with activity, with no empty moments. The prototype perhaps is Christmas, itself, to which we affix the word "Rush", because that, not "wait" is what the liturgical season of Advent really means to us. The demands to "do", complete all assignments, attend all functions, accomplish all goals is, frankly, neurotic. It is the very opposite of waiting for something to happen.

Deeper than the eccentricities of our cultural hyperactivity, however, waiting is somewhat of a life task for us. Our assumption, rather, universally accepted in our culture, is that significance is an experience that will come to us some time in the future. On occasion we allow the past to be the bearer of meaning, thus the current obsession with nostalgia. Mostly, however, we regard real significance as something that might happen someday, but not now. Thus, in a sense, we condemn ourselves to a lifetime of waiting. Children wait for school, for a first date, a crescendo of intense waiting occurs around the one remaining rite of passage and its symbol - a driver's license. Young people wait for graduation, freedom, marriage, job. Young adults wait for raises, new homes, fresh opportunity; middle age people begin to wait for the freedom of an empty nest, for security, for retirement. Dramatically increased life expectancy has presented our culture with the major dilemma of caring for elderly people in some way that is more than waiting for death.

Even though we don't like it intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, we are waiters - from birth to death. Every day of our lives we wait for the morning mail because it may surprise us, cheer us; from out of an unknown realm bring us meaning, and salvation maybe.

Sam Keen, philosopher and erstwhile theologian, wrote beautifully about the dynamic in his book, To a Dancing God. Describing his decision to forego the temptations and pleasures of freedom and the flesh of a Ph.D. at Princeton, he writes, "I began to invest heavily in a dream, a project, a future which was designed to justify my existence...I exchanged the blueprints for the Kingdom of God for another kingdom... postponing satisfaction, living expectantly toward some future event that would make me a complete human being." (p.14).

After several years of work the event happened. The Ph.D. was awarded. It isn't supposed to rain on Princeton graduations but it did that day and the clouds never went away. Keen wrote later, "Now that the future had arrived I set about to enjoy it. After thirty years of preparation, I had graduated into responsible life. The first few times someone referred to me as Dr Keen an electric shock ran through my spine. But the enjoyment began to dwindle, the Kingdom of God became a drag. The future for which I had sacrificed arrived, but the promised satisfaction did not...It didn't work. My resolve was short of breath...Disappointment, once tasted, remains in the system like sour garlic." (p.15).

There aren't many of us who haven't experienced that or something very near to it. And the universality of the experience suggests that there is something deeper still, something profound about our waiting. In a brilliant but very disturbing play Samuel Beckett called it "Waiting For Godot". The work has been studied, interpreted endlessly. Beckett seems to be saying that there is something for which all human beings wait, something which perhaps can never be defined precisely, something known primarily by the universal experience of its absence, something without which human life does not make sense. In the play, two pathetic characters, tramps actually, wait, day in and day out, for Godot - who never appears. In the suspended animation of waiting they talk nonsense, inconsequentials, empty chatter. If only Godot would come they would know what to do. But Godot doesn't come, and the viewer or reader is left with the conclusion that nothing in life really matters very much; that whatever it is we are anticipating will save us, or bring meaning and excitement and significance to our lives, isn't going to happen.

May I suggest that even if you don't share the playwright's conclusion, his analysis of the human condition is on the mark? May I suggest that even though he might be horrified at the analogy Samuel Beckett is not far from the experience of Zechariah and Elizabeth twenty centuries ago? And may I suggest that each of us can find ourselves somewhere in that experience? Young people have the nerve to prosecute the case for us. They're just brave enough to ask the question and demand answers. Sometimes they even write letters to their minister - "What is this life all about? What is important?... I'm nervous about what I can do with what I have and whether it is even worth it in the first place. Is life absurd? Do you busy yourself in your work until you die and then call it productive? Is there more?..." Samuel Beckett - or the writer of the Third Gospel - never put it any more eloquently than that.

The Bible supports the contention that the human condition is one of waiting. The story begins with Israel waiting in Egypt for its deliverance. It continues through a generation of wandering in a barren wilderness. It proceeds through a lonely exile, again waiting for deliverance. Throughout, it is a story of waiting and the promise, made over and over again to God's people, that He will resolve it: that something He will do will bring the waiting to an end.

And so Elizabeth had her baby and Zechariah's nine month silence came to an end and when the child was brought to the Temple the old man said words he had waited his whole life to say -

> "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and
> redeemed his people...
> And you child, will be called the prophet of the Most high:
> for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways...
> to give light to those who sit in darkness and the
> shadow of death,
> to guide our feet in the way of peace."

vs 76 – 79

That's probably the most accurate statement of our waiting. Is there really a better way to describe it than "sitting in darkness and the shadow of death"? Isn't that it? Aren't we really waiting for someone or something to tell us that our lives make sense? Aren't we waiting for someone to show us that the present, this day, this moment, this relationship, is full of significance, that meaning comes only in the present tense? Aren't we waiting for a sense of at-homeness in time and space; a gracious acceptance of self, and life situation and family? And aren't we all, frankly, waiting in the shadow of death, waiting for any visible light, any believable word that we matter, that we are not snuffed out like used candles, that our relationships with those who bring the only meaning we understand - our wives, husbands, parents, children, friends, are not rendered barren by the reality of death? Heavy going to be sure, but is there a more honest description of our predicament than that?

We are waiting for our salvation. That's the word Zechariah used when he looked down at the eight day old infant cradled in his arms. And his assertion was plainly that the waiting was over: not simply the waiting for a child, but that deeper, universally human waiting for salvation.

There is something about Christmas which addresses that at a level too profound for words. In fact the universal appeal of Christmas is so profound that sometimes we trivialize it by trying too hard to explain it. The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem means, simply, that the waiting is over. Our salvation is here. The darkness is banished.

Better, by far, to listen to the poetry, the beauty, the childlike wonder, the joy, the music...

O come, thou day-spring, come and cheer
Our spirits by thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

Amen.

We are waiting, Lord God, for a birth, for Good News, for love, for the assurance of Your Presence. Help us, in this Advent, to hear and see Your coming in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.